The Reigstad Diaries: The Death of My Father

I loved my dad. In 1955 when I was eight he took me to a Minneapolis Lakers game. That's when I saw George Mikan, the first big center in pro basketball.

Dad took me to see the Minneapolis Millers AAA baseball team. Ordinarily a minor league team would be no big deal, except that the Millers were showing off a new kid named Willie Mays.

One night at the Millers ball game my dad and I sat behind home plate and saw the longest baseball throw in history. Don Grate, the center fielder for the Millers, stood with his back against the center field fence. He took a running start and threw a baseball over home plate and deep into the stands, a throw of 443 feet.

Later that year my dad gave me two baseball gloves on the day before my ninth birthday, because on *on* my birthday, May 8, 1955 he was going with my mom to the grand opening of the Edina Country Club.

Before we could play catch, Dad and I had to go to his law office above the Rexall Pharmacy to pick up the mail. We were just about to leave his office when he broke out laughing and ran down the hallway, turned the corner and disappeared. I ran after him, but when I turned the corner, he was gone. He hadn't had time to get onto the elevator, and the only places he could have gone were the men's or women's rest rooms.

First I went into the men's room and checked every stall. No Dad. Then I knocked on the women's room door—an awkward thought for a little boy. There was no answer. Apprehensively I opened the door. Turning on the light, I looked all over. No Dad.

Anxiously I ran back to my dad's office. I hopped into his big leather desk chair and wondered what to do next. About 2 minutes later I heard him laughing and running down the hallway back to the office.

He burst into the office and sang, "*You* didn't *find* me!"

"Dad, where'd you go? I checked everywhere."

"Not everywhere! I was in the women's room standing on the toilet so you couldn't see my feet from the door."

He had taught me a lesson about presuppositions.

After we returned home we played catch a long time with our new gloves.

On that night my dad and mom got all dressed up to go to the grand opening. While they were gone, I watched Beat the Clock and The Jackie Gleason Show on TV. If my parents got home late enough, I could watch my favorite horror movie, The Bride of Frankenstein. As it turned out, I fell asleep on the sofa and missed the scary show. I heard the front door open and many voices all at once. My eyes were so tired that they wouldn't open. I couldn't make out the voices of all the people, but it sounded like my dad's friends who had been to the house before. I thought it was strange that a friend of my dad carried me to my room and tucked me in.

When my mother tucked me in, she would sing, "Away in the Manger" or "Silent Night" or "The Little Brown Church in the Wildwood." After I woke up she would sing "Good Morning to You," a cute little kindergarten song.

This morning was different. Mom was sitting on the edge of my bed and caressing my head. "Johnny," she whispered. "Daddy was in an accident last night. He fell and hurt himself very badly. I will help you get ready and we can go see him in the hospital."

I fell into shock, uncertain what had happened, what it meant, or what to do next. I just followed my mother and her friends.

On the way to the hospital, I found out what had happened. During the banquet at the country club, my father had gotten up to go to the rest room. He walked out of the banquet, into an unfinished hallway, and opened a door he thought led to the rest room. Instead, it was a doorway to an unfinished patio, a doorway that should have been locked. He fell out the door and down one flight, cracking his head on the pavement below. As the story goes, at the banquet he had been sitting between a physician and a funeral director.

My mother wanted me to wear my new suit to visit my father. When we got to the hospital, it was a pathetic sight: a well-dressed little boy on his ninth birthday, afraid and confused, visiting his father, who was bloodied, semi-conscious, full of tubes and IV's.

My dad whispered, "Johnny," and fell back asleep.

We drove to my aunt and uncle's house, where I stayed alone in my cousin's Carol's room. It was a very quiet and troubling night. The

next morning, my mother came to sit on the edge of my bed. She did not sing a song. Instead she caressed my head gently and whispered, “Daddy’s gone to heaven.” I burst into tears.

I refused to go to the funeral and no one could change my mind. A funeral at that time seemed like a cruel torture to me. Because my dad had served on a destroyer in the South Pacific in World War II, they gave me an American flag that had been draped over the casket. I never really cared about that flag, because my father was dead.

I was kept out of school for three days. When I returned, no one said anything about my father’s death. I was actually somewhat relieved about that, because explaining how I felt was impossible.

Less than a month later, we were asked to make something in school for our fathers on Father’s Day. The whole idea of the assignment made me sick to my stomach, but I went ahead and made an ashtray for my dead father. Later that day, when I came home on the bus, I ran to the house, pushed through the front door, and burst into tears as I threw myself into my mother’s arms. She held me and consoled me as I described my day of hell at school.

Several weeks later, school had quit for the summer, and I was feeling better. I thought that perhaps the pain of my father’s death was now behind me. One Saturday afternoon, I happened upon a man standing high upon a ladder painting a neighbor’s garage.
After I had watched him for a while, the man looked down from the ladder and gently asked, “What does your father do?” I felt all the pain again. I broke away and ran home as fast as I could. The trauma of my father’s death still reigned.

For years, I was saved from self-destruction by only my sense of humor and by my intellectual pursuits in philosophy. The deeply rooted pain and anger of my father’s death would drive my emotional life for over 20 years, until October 1975, when I encountered Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and the Transcendental Meditation technique. He revealed to me the bliss of Absolute Being, and it changed everything for me. The death of my father had become not a crushing tragedy but instead a badge of honor and an insight into eternal life.

In a profound coincidence, my college roommate, Peter, suffered a similar trauma to mine. His father was also killed in an accident. It happened the day before Christmas vacation of our junior year. We had just enjoyed the college Christmas concert with Peter’s parents. The next day we would take our last exams and go home for the holidays.

It was about 3 o'clock in the morning, we were both asleep in our beds. It was pitch black in the room. Slowly and quietly, the door opened from the outside. A tall, thin sheet of light entered the room from the lit hallway. Gradually, the door opened all the way. A large male shadow stood in the doorway, surrounded by a halo of light around its body. The shadow slowly emerged into the room.

"Uh-oh," I thought, "Whose bed will he sit on?" I felt it would be some bad news for one of us. The shadow came closer, until it stood right between our beds. Then I saw that it was the college pastor. That didn't make me feel any better. Slowly, he sat down on the edge of Peter's bed. "Peter," he said, "I'm sorry to bring you this bad news. Tonight, on the way home from the Christmas concert, your mother and father were in a head-on collision. Your mother is in the hospital and your father was killed."

Peter broke into sobs for a long time. He dragged himself out of bed and slumped by the mirror and towel rack. I had an awkward feeling of both tragedy and comedy, as he stood there in those baggy Derby jockey shorts he had bought with some stupid coupons at the Holiday gas station. I had razzed him, "For God's sake, Pete, get some decent underwear!"

But the tragedy prevailed. When his crying subsided and it was quiet again, the pastor said, "Maybe you better get dressed, Peter. We have to go across campus and tell your sister."
Slowly and painfully, Peter pulled on his pants and shirt. He pushed on his shoes without regard for socks. He left the laces untied and shuffled off with the pastor. I followed them to the elevator. The doors opened with surgical precision. Peter and the college pastor stepped into the elevator, I stood helplessly in the hallway, and we stared at nothing together as the elevator doors closed. Throughout the experience, neither Peter nor I spoke a single word to each other.
The next day I went to Peter's home to be with his family as they prepared for the funeral. The happiest person in the house was the dog, Spike. While everyone else was depressed, Spike was positively ecstatic and paraded with glee.

The day of the funeral, we entered the church together and I sat next to Peter in the front row. As the casket was wheeled in, I saw the American flag draped across it. I felt another huge wave of emotion. I sobbed and whispered, "My father." Peter put his arm around me. +